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Self-reflexiveness in Photo-film Form as Illustrated by Zbigniew Czapla's Paper Box

The origins of Zbigniew Czapla's film *Paper Box* are both simple and extraordinary. In the wake of a flood which struck his hometown, he lost all his possessions. Recovered several weeks later in what was left of his house, a paper box held the last surviving mementos – photographs. The recovery was short-lived, though, because the decay which had already set in meant a slow but inevitable destruction of the photographs. The film became a recording, a film archive of both the representations and the process of their degradation. Already such a short summary makes one easily guess the dramatic tension planned for the work and the related reflection on transience, chance and memory – for which the author himself argues in the synopsis. [1] The raising of these issues was triggered no doubt by the experience of loss. It can hardly go unnoticed that if the story had been told using artefacts other than photographs (toys, documents, which must have been destroyed as well) it would have lost much of its two-dimensionality. As the author of the dictionary *Obrazy fotografii* observes, photography “is characterised by a doubtful ambiguity”, [2] a capacity to describe reality in a synthetic, although many a time self-contradictory, manner. Owing to the photographs, Czapla's film is given additional meanings, which are attributed to photographic representations by culture. For *Paper Box* (*Papierowe pudełko*, 2011), as it seems, the most important meaning is the basic one – the function of recording, capturing the reality still, and serving as a carrier of memories.

A photographic *à rebours*, where the study of a representation resembles rather a reversed development process (a visible image becomes hidden again), is obviously pondered upon by the director. In addition, it must be noted that the recovered photographs play yet another role in the documentary. With the exception of the opening film shots and short animations, the visual material of *Paper Box* is made solely of photographs – hence, they provide both the contents and principal form of the work. The analysis of the chosen documentary type will not only help reveal the relationship between photographic and film elements but also scrutinize the cognitive consequences, following from

[1] <http://zbigniewczapla.pl/paperbox_pl.html> [accessed: April 3rd 2014].

[2] B. Stiegler, *Obrazy fotografii. Album metafor fotograficznych*, trans. J. Czudec, Towarzystwo Autorów

i Wydawców Prac Naukowych „Universitas”, Kraków 2009, p. 10 [Original: *Bilder der Photographie: ein Album photographischer Metaphern*, 2006].

the choice of a narrative technique. In film studies, this technique is referred to as a “film of photographs”.[3] However, discussing Czaplă’s film, this author would like to suggest the term “photo-film” and show its usefulness for describing similar audiovisual works.

Paper Box is a variety of iconographic film “whose visual material consists of still paintings, graphics and photographs animated using film means”.[4] It clearly follows from the definition that in each case we deal not only with the film medium. In turn, in the term “film of photographs” a superior-inferior relationship is noticeable, as a result of which the final message would be dominated by the film art. The relationship appears to follow from the very nature of photography, which John Berger defined in the following way:

Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions. [...] Photographs in themselves do not narrate.[5]

Film means of expression, similarly to any other discourse, not only “animate” photographs, but also explain and interpret them. An example illustrating a similar practice would be a comparison of two films: *Fleischer’s Album* (*Album Fleischera*, 1962) by Janusz Majewski and *Just Another Day for Gestapo Officer Schmidt* (*Powszedni dzień gestapowca Schmidta*, 1963) by Jerzy Ziarnik. In both cases, what was filmed was private photographs belonging to German soldiers from World War Two. Although the photographs came from different sources, what they had in common was an iconographic similarity and the profiles of the photographers or the photographed. Despite all this, the filmmakers produced radically different pictures as a result of different techniques they used (*repollero*, close-ups, montage) or the character of the author’s commentaries they provided. The burden of interpretation rested then on the film elements.

What of, however, photographic representations? Does not their presence affect the message in some way? According to Adam Dziadek, studying the relationship between paintings and Polish *ekphrases*, the direction of reading is never one-sided:

No text has a single picture suitable to it, nor a single picture has a unique text suitable to it. This ‘insolvable’ or rather a double bind, I consider a central issue of relationships between pictures and texts.[6]

Although the comment quoted after Jean-Luc Nancy concerns the relationships between literature and visual representations, it clearly

[3] M. Jazdon, “Fotografie w roli głównej. O polskim filmie ikonograficznym ze zdjęć”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2006, no. 54–55.

[4] *Film ikonograficzny*, in: M. Hendrykowski, *Słownik terminów filmowych*, Ars Nova, Poznań 1994, p. 122.

[5] J. Berger, “Uses of photography”, in: *About Look-*

ing, Vintage International, New York 1992, p. 51.

[6] A. Dziadek, “Typologie, typologie...” [Typology inc.], in: *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interpretacji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo UŚ, Katowice 2011, p. 15.

conveys an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the correspondence of arts. This approach would consist in an effort to concisely express the message and to make allowances for the specific nature of all media participating in an artistic statement.

Hence, although the *definiens* does not change, the replacing of the “film of photographs” with “photo-film” modifies the methodology of analysis.[7] The symbolism of photographs can no longer be ignored, because we are faced with a hybrid requiring both film science and theory of photography. Doubts as to the nature of photo-films are exacerbated by contemporary reflections on the status of the cinema: Konrad Klejsa, to name but one, distinguishes, next to films, “film-like things”. Among works bringing confusion to the classical definition, he mentions a “photographic novel” by Chris Marker, i.e. the famous *La jetée* (Pomost, 1962).[8]

Relying on the conclusions drawn so far, this author shall proceed now to the analysis of *Paper Box*, with the parallel explanations of photographic elements (the symbols of the album, memory, old age, and blemish) and film ones (montage, music, off-screen voice, *repollero*, animation). Already from the perspective of “photo-film”, attention shall be drawn to the consequences of the synthesis of both media and to the self-reflexiveness of Czapla’s picture.

A motif originating within the world of photography, much-used by filmmakers producing photo-films, is the family album. Its presence connotes above all a specific way of reading: ordered, chronological and distinguishing individual pictures as complete wholes. It is alluded to, at least in the opening sequences of the above-mentioned pictures, by Janusz Majewski and Jerzy Ziarnik as well. The linear nature of photographic albums is a direct consequence of the type of photographs shown in them. Family pictures are taken having in mind a limited number of viewers and a specific function:

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness [...] A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family – and, often, is all that remains of it.[9]

Starting an album may be accompanied by sentimental feelings or pragmatic motivations related to the storing of events and images of those who are close to us. Ultimately, for an individual browsing an album and taking part in this peculiar variety of a performance (posing for a picture always involves some dramatization), the most important matter is the building of identity, following from genealogical ties. However, this is so not only because home photography:

[7] In German film studies the term “fotofilm” is equivalent to iconographic films of photographs. See: *Viva Fotofilm. bewegt/unbewegt*, eds. K. Pratschke, G. Hámos & T. Tode, Marburg 2010.

[8] K. Klejsa, “A film-like thing, czyli o tym, jak

zjawiska filmopodobne utrudniają odpowiedź na pytanie: ‘Co to jest film?’”, in: *Kino po kinie*, ed. A. Gwóźdź, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2010, p. 35.

[9] S. Sontag, *On Photography*, Carl Hanser, New York 2005, pp. 5–6.

makes it possible for us to recall the past and above all shows that we have lived the past in this or that way [...]. First, I was photographed in this way, so I lived that way; next, I was photographed so I existed.^[10]

A photograph, then, is not so much a carrier of memories and stories but rather a proof of existence – it lends an ontological sense to the people portrayed.

The photographs in *Paper Box* cannot, however, testify to any existence – and not only because the images of people portrayed long ago vanish from them. The photographs have fallen out of albums, the camera shows them scattered around and mixed, and divides images into small bits and pieces that are hardly recognizable. Moreover, the film's formal means depend on the changes that took place in the pictures, leaving only less important fragments visible. For instance, in a wedding picture, the faces of the bride and groom are no longer visible. The emerging composition of the entire work resembles more a collage than a linear arrangement of a book. The only logic, which originates with a traditional concept of family chronicle and guides the narrative of the film, has ironic overtones. The rhythm of the photo-film is measured by the successive stages of destruction listed and dated by Czapla. Following the practice of describing old photographs, he only underscores the void awaiting the viewers at the end of the film. The cognitive chaos is heightened by the audio: the rustle as it were, of pictures being shifted, and the cacophonous soundtrack by Jarosław Konopka.

Taking and storing family photographs is meant to save memories by providing a reliable framework. This conviction is abolished by the director, who records comments by his family members, trying to recognize people in those old photos which have not yet faded. Off-screen voices to a large extent copy (confirm?) the interpretation suggested by the poetics of the film. Among broken-off sentences, the most certain are the questions and conclusions full of resignation: "What was his name?", "I guess it's him", "I don't know", "I did not meet him". Although we have a right to expect that the utterances were made over the photographs found in the paper box, they sound familiar and universal. For contrary to the purposes it is held to have, the act of archiving often turns against us: "An archive is not only a repository, but also a place of oblivion, deletion from memory and disappearance"^[11] The symbols of the fleeting nature of the human memory, which cannot be replaced by any pictures, cut-ins of notes and descriptions on the reverse sides of photographs, show them disappearing due to progressing decay. Another film technique to express this manner of reading such unusual material is animation. The motion produced by watercolour animations expresses also a desire to add something, to animate not only the photographs, but also memories. But a single-frame animation

[10] F. Soulages, *Estetyka fotografii. Strata i zysk*, trans. B. Mytych-Forajter, W. Forajter, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas,

Kraków 2007, p. 17 [Original: *Esthétique de la photographie: la perte et le reste*, 1998].

[11] B. Stiegler, op. cit., p. 21.

showing the stages of the destruction of a selected photograph is already a painful reflection upon transience and loss.

Old photographs are often an object of fascination for researchers and viewers because of their lack of transparency. Their accompanying material flaws and temporal distance induce a singular form of reception, one focused on visual pleasure and intellectual horizons:

But part of the built-in interest of photographs, and a major source of their aesthetic value, is precisely the transformations that time works upon them, the way they escape the intentions of their makers. Given enough time, many photographs do acquire an aura.[12]

As with the earlier notions ascribed to photographic representations, this one, too, acquires a bitter equivocality in Czapla's film. A chance happening, which may make a photograph unique, here determines its metaphysical annihilation. The perception of photographs as magic pictures is reflected in *Paper Box*:

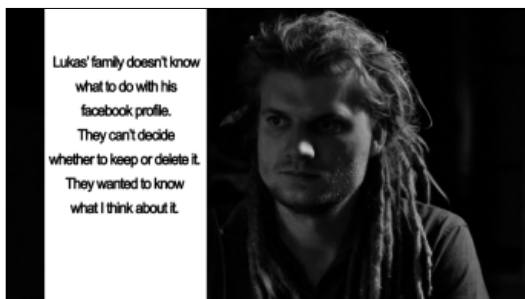
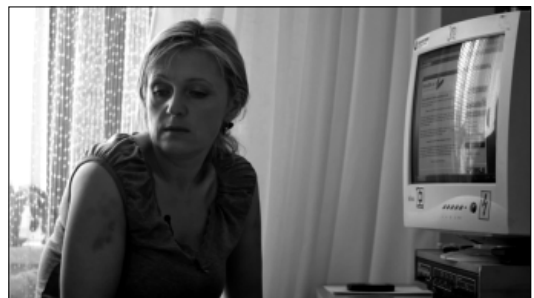
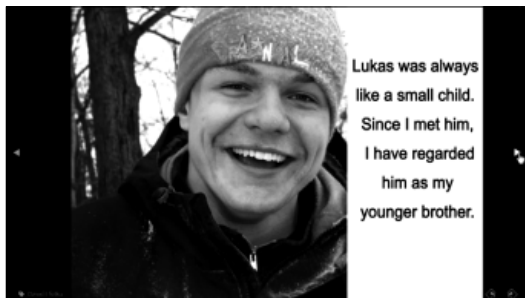
Few people in this society share the primitive dread of cameras that comes from thinking of the photograph as a material part of themselves. But some trace of the magic remains: for example, in our reluctance to tear up or throw away the photograph of a loved one, especially of someone dead or far away.[13]

By tracing photographic and film elements in Czapla's photo-film, it is possible to note a few common items that cross and complement one another. One of them is the paradigm, discussed above, of recording and registering events. Another is a self-oriented strand. Zbigniew Czapla takes on here a double role – that of a hero and a protagonist, experiencing the events in question and a loss. The members of his family that appear are, as it were, alter egos of the filmmaker. Although they are not the authors of the photographs commented on, in their attempts to establish the photographs' origins they are the only liaisons between the present and the past. Finally, the film ends with a shot of several picture remains stripped of even the mirages of meanings. This is also a signal that the photo-film must end here. Its continuation and discursiveness depend on the photographs that, following the semiological theory of Roland Barthes, should be called the signs of this film statement.

The self-reflexivity of *Paper Box* would rest above all on the awareness of an unbreakable relationship between the film and photographic parts and *vice versa*. Ultimately, the title of the photo-film can be interpreted on three levels of sense. The first, the most obvious and literal, belongs to the described reality. The second would be a metaphorical treatment of photography as a *camera obscura*, degrading it to the mechanism of making pictures: as much unusual as fleeting. Finally, the photo-film itself acquires the status of a "paper box" because as a form of expression it cannot fully guarantee that the discourse will stay permanent and immutable.

[12] S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 110.

[13] Ibidem, p. 170.



Forever Young, dir. Robin Lipo,
prod. Polish National Film School in Lodz, 2011